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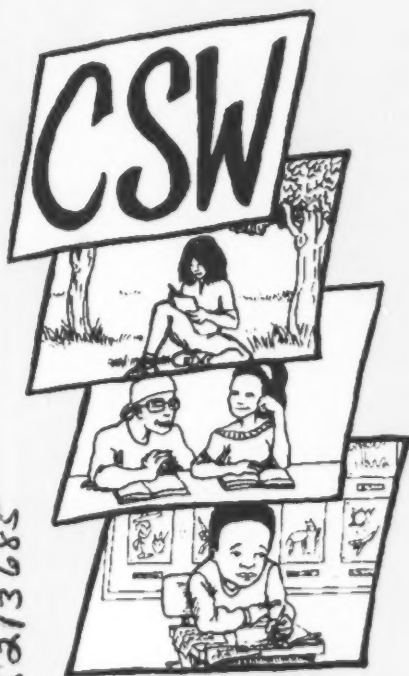
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ABSTRACT

The development of written language is intertwined with children's experiences with diverse symbolic media. During their second year of life, children begin to use symbolic tools to invest meaning in drawn marks. The evolution of drawing is linked in complex ways to dramatic gesture and speech, sometimes combined in social play. Exploratory play with print and the use of print as a prop within dramatic play are valuable supports for young children's entry into written language. Children first attempt to orchestrate the system during familiar, manageable activities. Two male children from an ongoing study of literacy development among African-American students in an urban school provide an illustration of how early writing is shaped by social activity and how writing can assume greater functional importance. The children began to consider critically the relationship between their pictures and their texts, as they assumed more deliberate control over the kind of information they would include in each medium. Implications for early childhood education include: (1) children need many opportunities to draw, play, dance, and sing; (2) teachers need to help connect print with the liveliness of children's use of other symbolic forms; (3) teachers should talk to children about their efforts to help them reflect upon their processes; (4) educators should be cautious about uncritically applying "writing process" curricula developed for older children; and (5) caution should be used in applying simple functional models of oral language in research on written language growth. (Four figures of children's drawings are included; 48 references are attached.) (RS)

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The Changing Role of Written Language
in Children's Symbolic Repertoires**

Anne Haas Dyson

September, 1992

**University of California
at Berkeley**

**Carnegie Mellon
University**

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From Prop to Mediator: The Changing Role of Written Language in Children's Symbolic Repertoires

Anne Haas Dyson

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Lamar and James are nearing the end of their kindergarten year. Whether reading books or playing cops and robbers, doing puzzles or sharing lunch, they have been steadfast companions. One of their favorite activities has been verbal one-upmanship. This game can accompany and structure even their daily drawing and writing. In the following example, the two boys are drawing themselves swimming; this is part of an activity in which class members are making their own versions of an "I am a (blank)" pattern book:

- James: I'm swimming in the lake, I'm swimming in the lake. I won't come in and eat my cake. (chanting and drawing) This gonna be the waves. ... (drawing waves)
- Lamar: Do you know what these lines are? (pointing to his own drawing) They're the waves. ... And then the water gets higher (drawing his waves higher).
- James: Mine's gonna get higher too. My water's higher than you.
- Lamar: Shoot. Mine is higher than yours. Look at this. ... Mine is over my head. ... Mine got deeper. And then a shark was coming. Then a shark was coming. ... (drawing a shark)
- James: If they had a shark in the water, we'd get ready to get out of the water.
- Lamar: I'm getting ready to get out of the water 'cause the shark. ... (chanting) I'm deep in the water. The shark's gonna kill me.
- James: But ooh! There's a shark in the water. (Now James puts a shark in his own picture.)

At the end of this long and complex episode, Lamar writes "I am a swimmer."

Considering this book's focus on early literacy development, what in Lamar's and James's activity is particularly relevant? Should we attend most closely to how Lamar goes about writing "I am a swimmer"? Lamar's caption, though, seems a mere supplement to his playful talking and drawing. It is not through print but through words and pictures that Lamar represents his ideas, reflects on them, and interacts with James about them. Lamar has a long and complex way to go before the written forms themselves will be able to mediate in substantive ways Lamar's intellectual and social activities.

To understand the development of written language, therefore, we must examine most closely, not the written forms themselves, but the changing

role of those forms in children's symbolic activity. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how children's use of written language changes during the early childhood years. By *written language*, I do not mean simply children's handwriting and spelling; I mean children's use of letter forms as symbols that help them to represent and to reflect on their ideas and to interact with other people about them. The major change of interest is from children's use of print as a kind of prop, an interesting object to be used *in* varied kinds of social, often playful, activity, to the use of print as a mediator *through* which new kinds of social activity, including new kinds of play, can happen.

The ultimate aim of this chapter is to illustrate that the development of written language is intertwined with children's experiences with diverse symbolic media. The symbolic tool of writing is, or should be, a remarkably accessible one to young school children from diverse cultural backgrounds, for it is a tool that takes root amidst more comfortable symbolic media and much interaction with appreciative others. I also aim, however, to make clear the limits of written language as an expressive and learning tool in the early years and, thus, the importance of the arts in their own right.

To these ends, throughout the chapter I will turn to Lamar and his classmates, children from an ongoing study of literacy development among African-American children in an urban school (Dyson, 1992). They will provide clear illustrations of how children's abilities as drawers, talkers, and social players are linked in dynamic ways to their emerging skills as writers.

To set a stage for this exploration of written language, I first discuss the nature of symbol-making and, then, turn to drawing, a graphic medium whose developmental history may help pave the way for writing. Undergirding this chapter is a social constructivist vision of development; that is, I assume that children construct their own understandings of the world, including their understandings of how symbolic media work, and that they do so as they engage in social activities with other people (Vygotsky, 1978).

THE NATURE OF SYMBOL-MAKING

A symbol—a word, a picture, a dance—exists because of a human intention to infuse some tangible form—a sound, a mark, a movement—with meaning and, thereby, to comment on or take action in the social world. Imagine, for example, Lamar as he draws a flowing graphic mark across his paper. That mark has an identity of its own—it is a line. At the same time, however, Lamar links the dynamic and sensual quality of the line—its fluidity—to that of a wave. Lamar's line thus becomes a "vehicle"; it carries meaning beyond itself (Werner & Kaplan, 1963). That vehicle not only allows Lamar to play with waves as he sits in his classroom, but it also allows James to join the play. Such symbol-making is the essence of what it means to be human. We as humans use symbols to liberate us from the here-and-now, to enter worlds of possibility and, at the same time, join with others who share

the same "imaginative universe"; people who share a culture share similar ways of infusing meaning into sounds (language), movement (dance), and lines (drawings), among other media (Geertz, 1983).

And yet, despite its universality—that is, despite the biological predisposition of human beings to infuse meaning into objects (Winner, 1989), Lamar's control of his wavy line should not be taken for granted. Its developmental evolution is linked not simply to biology but to cultural activity. Taking a closer look at the evolution of drawing, and the critical role of talk and gesture in that evolution, will help clarify the evolution of the more complex graphic medium of written language.

GRAPHIC SYMBOLISM BEGINS: THE EMERGENCE OF DRAWING

During the early childhood years, children acquire the basic symbolic tools or repertoire of their culture (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Werner & Kaplan, 1963). Children initially explore each available medium without any intention to symbolize. Rather, they manipulate the sounds of language, the movement of their own body, the graphic marks of drawing and painting implements, the structural possibilities of blocks and other constructive media. Each medium offers children distinctive physical and visual properties to explore. And so, in Nancy Smith's words (1979, p. 21), "[the child] does what he [sic] does, it [the medium] does what it does. ... One discovery leads to the next as he responds to the material and as the material responds to him."

During the second year of life, children begin to use gestures and words to symbolize—to represent—significant actions in their world (Gardner & Wolf, 1987). Moreover, they also begin to use these symbolic tools to invest meaning in drawn marks. The child runs across the page making marks with a pencil, and thus the child has drawn someone running. The child jumps with a marker and thus draws a rabbit jumping. Symbolic meaning comes from the *gestures*, not the marks. The marks are thus a kind of prop—a critically important prop, but nonetheless a prop—for children's dramatic play (Mathews, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978; Wolf & Perry, 1989).

Around age three, children begin to notice similarities between salient physical features of the world and their own graphic constructions. However, these discoveries come *after* their drawing, when they attempt to "read" the meaning of what they have made and, just as importantly, to communicate its potential meaning to other people. Through *talk* with others, children invest their marks with meaning. Golomb's (1974, 1988) extensive studies reveal how the interest of other people prompts children to talk about their drawings, read their marks, and discover hidden meanings.

As children gain experience, they begin to accompany their drawing with talk about their evolving intentions. Those intentions often prove too ambitious, and so children reinterpret their original intentions to ones more suited to their products (Golomb, 1974; see also Brittain, 1979). "This gonna be

the waves," said James. But when his scribbly waves did not look like Lamar's controlled ones, he changed: "This is a storm."

As Vygotsky (1978) argued, talk eventually serves not only to represent meanings and to interact with others about those meanings, but to *regulate* drawing itself. That is, talk helps the child to plan a particular drawing and to monitor her or his shaping of lines and curves. Indeed, even for adult artists, talk may be a way of articulating plans and evaluating progress. In a sense, such talk helps drawing become a mediator, a way of giving graphic voice to an intention; because of this Vygotsky described drawing as a kind of "graphic speech" that paves the way for writing (see also Dyson, 1982).

Speech also serves a regulatory function in children's play. Initially objects gain their meaning from the child's gestures. A block of wood might be a baby if it can be held; a broom can be a horse if it can be ridden. Eventually, however, speech allows children to represent meaning, to share their ideas with other people, and to *engage in increasingly more deliberate, more planful activity* (Vygotsky, 1978; see also Garvey, 1990, for related research). With the support of talk, then, play becomes a kind of "canvas" on which young children can collaboratively symbolize ideas and feelings (Fein, 1987, p. 298). Guided by talk, children use sound, motion, and tempo to create dramas in which people scream or soothe, rush or relax, worry or reassure.

In fact, collaborative, playful talk can support the evolution of drawing itself, a more literal canvas, as Lamar and James illustrated. Lamar had originally used drawing as a prop, a graphic mark within an elaborate and told story; the story was in no way bound by the drawing but, given an interested other, evolved far away from the page. When Lamar's drawing became a way of engaging in social play with James, he attended more carefully to the meaning of each line, trying to outdo James. Listen to Lamar again as he adds wavy line after wavy line to his picture; his drawing is deliberate, controlled, as he seeks to make his waves "higher than yours":

Shoot. Mine [my water] is higher than yours. Look at this ... Mine is over my head ... Mine go deeper. Deeper. Draw over the top. My head's under the water. Everything's under water!

Taking a long view—comparing his current drawing efforts to earlier ones—Lamar was beginning to differentiate the symbolic potential of drawing from that of talk and gesture. That is, he was figuring out how to accomplish his representational and social goals *through* the graphic medium. Drawing was thus becoming a mediator: Lamar was using drawing to convey his intentions and, at the same time, the possibilities of the medium shaped his intentions. Lamar's social play with James helped transform his drawing, and drawing itself led to a new kind of social play.

In sum, the evolution of drawing is linked in complex ways to dramatic gesture and speech, sometimes combined in social play. As in all areas of symbol development (Wolf & Gardner, 1987), children approach the new symbolic medium of drawing through old, comfortable procedures (e.g.,

dramatic gesture). Gradually, there are functional shifts, as the visual symbols of drawing become more capable of mediating—shaping and being shaped by—the child's social and representational intentions (Dyson, 1991; for a seminal discussion of symbolic differentiation, see Werner & Kaplan, 1963).

I now turn to writing development, where similar phenomena occur: the initial exploratory behavior; the shaping of children's symbolic behavior by social activity; the emergence of written forms as kinds of props or supplements to other symbolic tools, among them, gesture and talk; and functional shifts, as children begin to use writing as a mediator—that is, as writing assumes some of the representational and social work earlier accomplished by other media.

THE EMERGENCE OF WRITING: EARLY EXPLORATORY PLAY

Initially, young children's use of writing is very idiosyncratic; they explore the system's nature, gaining some familiarity with its functions (what written language can socially accomplish), rhetorical content (how it sounds in particular situations), and graphic marks (what it looks like), but they do not control the system as a whole. That is, they do not understand precisely how letters or words are manipulated in order to represent and reflect on experiences and interact with other people. As in their first drawing, the writing act itself—the gesture and any accompanying talk—makes their letters and letter-like marks meaningful (Dyson, 1983; Luria, 1983).

Much of young children's writing is a kind of exploratory play, common in the developmental beginnings of all symbolic media. After a careful study of the products of such play, Clay (1975) provided a seminal analysis of the kinds of discovery and practice it furthers. Children explore, for example, the nature of letter forms, their directional layout on the paper, and the spatial arrangement of text itself. And, as with drawing, when questioned by an adult, children may invent a meaning for their marks. A child manipulating lines, though, may discover a shape that looks like a wave, but the potential meaning of a child's own manipulated letters does not so readily reveal itself. Thus, a great deal of questioning accompanies the early exploration of writing (Durkin, 1966). Indeed, Clay entitled her book, *What Did I Write?*, a question more likely to occur than "What did I draw?"

Another kind of early play with print may happen in the context of dramatic play, when, given the opportunity, children explore the functions of written language. For example, in the "home" center, children may make grocery lists and take phone messages (Schickedanz, 1978); in the doctor's office, they may read in the waiting room, write out prescriptions, and make appointments (Morrow & Rand, 1991). In this play, which, like exploratory play with letter forms, continues throughout the early childhood period, children do not typically focus on precisely encoding meaning. Rather, as with exploratory play, the accompanying gestures and talk make the child's intentions clear.

Exploratory play with print and the use of print as a prop within dramatic play are valuable supports for young children's entry into written language. But neither kind of play in and of itself leads the child to an understanding of the inner workings of the system—to the ability to manipulate letters and thereby words to interact with others. In a discussion of Vygotsky's ideas, Wertsch (1989, p. 18) explained, symbolic tools are not "props that simply facilitate" human activities; rather, they are mediators that reshape the nature of activities themselves.

To gain insight into how written language becomes a mediator of social activity, we must focus not simply on children's knowledge of the kinds of functions writing serves in the adult world, nor on their knowledge of graphic marks like letters. Rather we must examine how children begin to orchestrate their functional and graphic knowledge into systemic use—that is, how they begin to match precisely meanings and graphics to carry out important activities in particular situations. Within social activities deemed by the child's culture "literacy activities" and given the social assistance of others, children begin to use written symbols to carry some of the functional load earlier handled by speech, gesture, and drawing. This developmental process is discussed in the two sections to follow.

ORCHESTRATING THE WRITTEN SYSTEM

As in all other areas of symbol development, children first attempt to orchestrate the system during familiar, manageable activities. Children may continue to "just write" letters or to use "curspid" (wavy-line) writing (e.g., when writing stories or extended texts in dramatic play) but attempt more precise encoding when writing smaller units, especially names. While such labeling can occur as part of dramatic play, naming is in and of itself an activity of great interest to many young children and one in which they will invest considerable intellectual energy, especially if they are in the company of interested adults and peers (e.g., Durkin, 1966; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982).

Initially children's written names do not represent "oral language"; they are letters that belong to certain people or things. That is, rather than trying to encode speech into graphics, children typically made meaningful graphics about which they can talk (e.g., "This is my Mama's name.") (Dyson, 1983). Just as speech helps to organize and elaborate on the meaning of early drawn objects, so too it aids early written names. For children, in fact, names are kinds of objects; they belong to people and things (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Papandropoulou & Sinclair, 1974).

Figure 1 presents a drawn and written piece from Lamar's daily journal, completed early in the school year. The piece illustrates both early exploration of letter-like forms and the representational use of drawing and writing to name important people and things in a child's world. Lamar drew a sun, a rainbow, flying insects and wrote letter-like forms and his name (upper right-hand corner).



Figure 1. Lamar's early writing: exploring and naming.

Later in the year, Lamar made more extensive use of labeling in the context of a social activity that accentuated the value of names. The children had been to visit the aquarium, a very exciting trip for Lamar. After the experience, he drew and talked with his friends about the fish they had seen. The children's drawing and talking supported each other, as they drew visual details and verbally discussed and, indeed, argued about the characteristics and names of different fish. Moreover, Lamar used a classroom "ocean animal" chart as a resource for the spelling of each creature's name; writing labels was a way to mark graphically his verbal claims about the kinds of fish he and his friends had seen and, therefore, drawn. Labeling was a common functional use of writing in his classroom, and one he could, by the spring of his kindergarten year, manage himself with the support of teacher help and graphic aids.

While Lamar was clearly matching particular letters to particular names, children's engagement in such labeling activities does not require understanding that writing represents speech. For writing to become graphic discourse—written language—children must become aware that it is language itself which is written (Vygotsky, 1978). To illustrate how this discovery may happen, I turn to studies of young children's encoding of names.

Ferreiro (1980; Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982), who conducted her work in Latin America, used Piagetian clinical interview techniques as children engaged in a range of literacy tasks. Within the context of these tasks, children seem to progress from simply making letters to hypothesizing a direct and concrete relationship between features of those letters and their intended meaning. Children seem particularly sensitive to the size and age of the referent. For example, one four-year-old, Marianna, asked for a small number of letters to write her own name and "as much as a thousand" to write her father's name (which has only two syllables).

Such hypotheses introduce many puzzling circumstances for children. For example, Marianna will learn that her own name has in fact more letters than her father's. Eventually, children begin to search for some sort of reliable one-to-one correspondence between the letters of a name and the name itself. This search will lead some children to begin to use characteristics of the *sound* of the name to invent spellings, evidence that children are beginning to use written language as a second order symbol system. Participating in language activities involving rhymes (found in plentiful supply in Mother Goose verses, poetry, and picture books built on language patterns) may help children become more conscious of the sounds in words and in this way contribute to early spelling (Bryant, Bradley, Maclean, & Crossland, 1989).

Read (1971, 1986) provided the seminal studies of the evolution of children's alphabetic spellings and the rule system underlying how they relate sounds to letters. Their spellings, like a five-year-old's *BS* for "basghetti," can be as captivating as their pictures and, like all children's symbolic efforts, will evolve over time as their understandings become more sophisticated.

Figure 2. Lamar's naming of known ocean creatures through drawing and writing.



WRITTEN LANGUAGE: FROM PROP TO MEDIATOR IN STORY WRITING

While writing labels can mediate some functional activities, like listing names of people and objects, it may also support more extended efforts, like composing stories. When children "write" stories, they may engage in "symbol weaving": written words are intertwined with talk and drawing, as children call upon all their symbolic powers (Dyson, 1986). Typically, any written words are indeed words in, rather than the essential stuff of, their world. That is, the words are the names of objects or figures or, perhaps, the sound of an event (e.g., "BOOM"). The bulk of the meaning may be in drawing or talk—or perhaps remain unarticulated in their own memories and imaginations. Writing is more prop than mediator.

Lamar provides a good illustration of how early writing is shaped by social activity and how, within an activity, writing can begin to assume greater functional importance. Late in the spring of his kindergarten year, Lamar first displayed an attempt to manipulate written words to help compose a story. Lamar's teacher had suggested that he write a story about his visit to the aquarium. Such a suggestion was usually followed by drawing and dictation. However, Lamar had made an important discovery when he was labeling his ocean animals (see Figure 2). In writing the label *catfish*, Lamar recognized C-A-T ("C-A-T spells cat" was a common chant among the kindergartners.) The conscious realization that the spoken and written names of two animals could together create the name of an entirely different animal intrigued him. He played with that discovery, manipulating the written words as he told a story, just as earlier he had manipulated the drawn waves as he told a story.

On a new sheet of paper, Lamar wrote *catfish*. "No," he said. He turned the paper over and wrote *cat* and, underneath, *fish*. (See Figure 3.) Next, he drew a cat and a fish. He "read" his story. "The cat wants to eat the fish." Lamar's written graphics were beginning to mediate his stories. He wrote them in a deliberate way, thinking about the placement of the names and how different placements would represent different stories. He wanted a story about a *cat* and a *fish*, not a *catfish*.

Lamar's story was quite simple. He was using written names to represent only part of his told story; moreover, he was not attempting to manipulate readers' emotions or their evolving understandings of his tale. Still, Lamar was attempting to control the slow, deliberate process of using graphic symbols to mediate linguistic meaning.

Soon after this event, in fact, Lamar received a vivid example of the social power literacy can potentially exert, for good or ill. Lamar had drawn and told a story in which two boys are by the ocean; they fall in, and a shark eats them. After he drew, with his teacher's encouragement, he attempted to write his story. Lamar wrote a much reduced version of his story, one without the compelling dialogue he dramatized and the dramatic images he drew. (See Figure 4.)

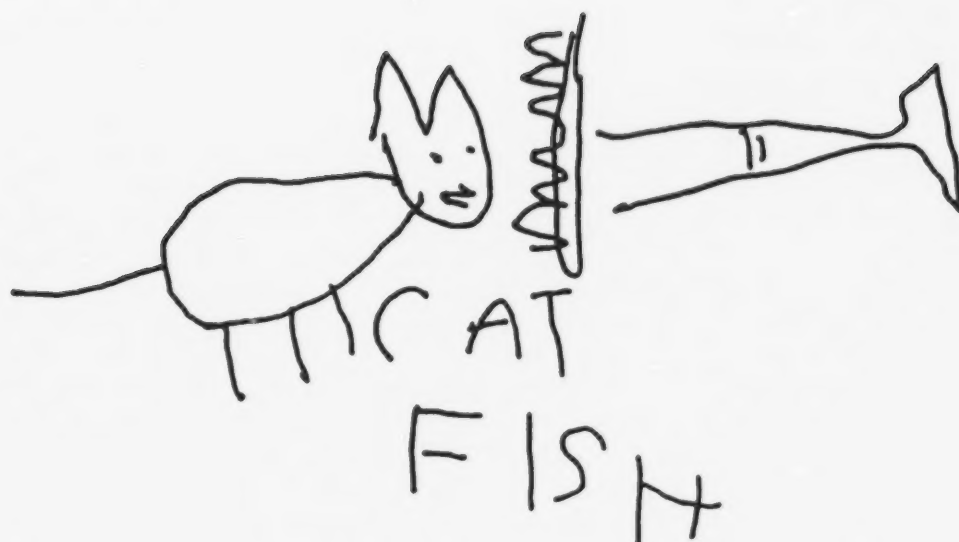
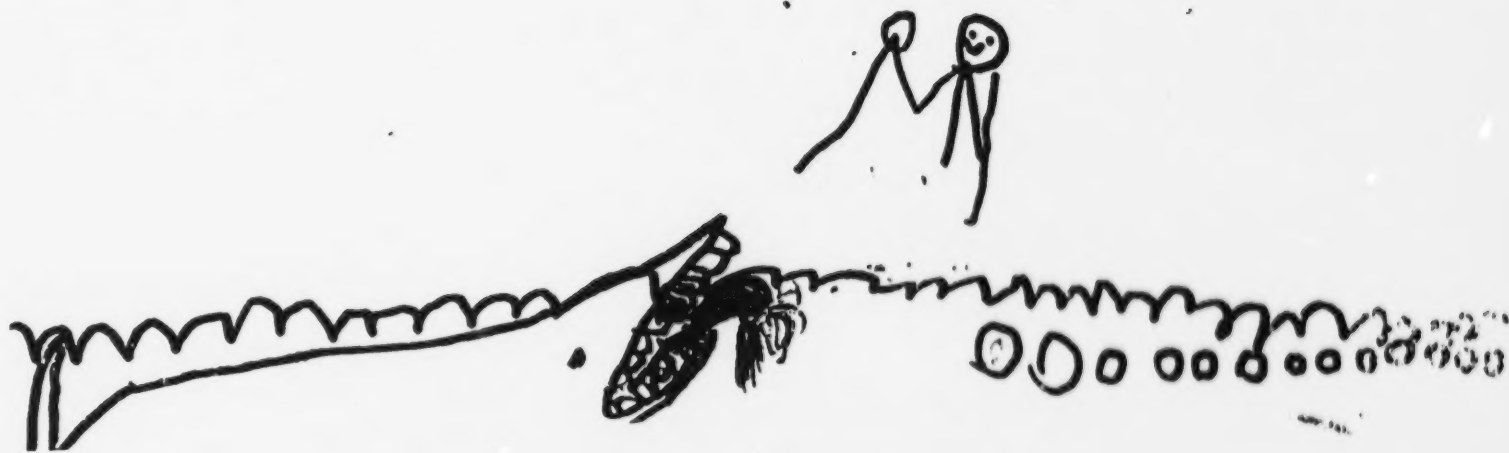


Figure 3. Lamar's drawn, written, and told story about a cat and a fish.

TO BY2 WT
N TE WD
A SRK



18A

Figure 4. Lamar's written story: Two boys went in the water. A shark.

To Bys Wt
N TE WD
A SRK

Translation: Two boys went in the water. A shark.

James was intrigued by Lamar's efforts. Because he was less knowledgeable about print—and more dependent than Lamar on an oral investment of the print's meaning—James asked Lamar how to write "Once there was a boy and Jaws come." Lamar responded:

Lamar: Man, you should write this. (pointing to his own text)
James: Why?
Lamar: 'Cause (reading) "boys go in the water."

James asks again and Lamar reiterates that he should write what he has written. He knows that what he has written is not what James has asked for, but he also knows that (a) James has no way of knowing that and (b) he would find it very difficult to write James' request. So Lamar tells James to copy his letters, "So the boy can go in the water." And when James asks him about writing that Jaws came, Lamar tells him to copy *SRK* and then grins sheepishly at me:

Lamar: I tricked him. I can read. I didn't know I could do that. I didn't know I could do nothing but sit here all day.

In the midst of interacting with James, Lamar discovered his own literacy and its potential social power.

Still Lamar at this point is using writing only as a supplement to represent a small part of his story. The adventure is played out in all its drama in the drawing and playing. And it is the drawing and dramatic play that make his work accessible to others—that elicited James' attention—and that also provide him with the most satisfying "canvas" for replaying the emotional quality of experiences.

How do children's written words themselves become sites for dramatic, vivid adventures? This was the question I investigated during a three-year study in an urban magnet school that placed particular value on the expressive arts (Dyson, 1989). I focused on the changing role of writing in four- to eight-year-olds' symbol-making and social interactions during a daily composing period.

The observed children initially relied on drawing and talking to carry much of their story meaning and, also, to engage their peers' attention. Their writing and dictating was primarily a descriptive supplement to their pictures. In time, though, the children began to attend to each other's reading and planning of their texts, evidencing the curiosity children have about what their peers are doing. Their playful and critical talk thus engulfed their writing and helped it become a legitimate object of attention, separate from their pictures.

Children began to consider critically the relationship between their pictures and their texts, as they assumed more deliberate control over the kind of information they would include in each medium. Gradually their written stories contained more narrative action, their pictures more illustrations of key ideas. Moreover, they began to use writing playfully to engage their peers. They made their friends characters in their stories, and they also began to plan deliberately to include certain words or actions to amuse or tease them.

Thus the children came to understand that story writers and their readers interact through—play within—the words, and, as authors, they were in charge of the interaction. Through manipulating the elements (and thereby the words) of written language they could manipulate as well the social responses of others, that is, the way their audience visualized, emotionally responded to, and reasoned about their efforts. Indeed, as Edelsky's (1986) work has suggested, young bilingual writers may manipulate, not only words, but languages themselves in order to convey emphasis, a concern for the audience (who may know only one language or the other), or simply to capture a memory or feeling that is metaphorically more vivid in one language rather than another.

To illustrate the artistic and social potential of young writers, I turn to William, a third grader in Lamar's school. As a story writer, William had a strong sense of writing as interactive play, a sense that seemed supported by his sociocultural traditions. Playful storytelling is an important part of African-American culture and, indeed, William was a fine storyteller. It was not until the latter half of the third grade, however, that the written medium effectively mediated his artful tales.

In the following story, William played with his audience, anticipating his peers' curiosity and giggles, their reflective evaluations of his uncle (whom he displays as not too smart) and of himself (a disparaged but eventually respected character in his own story). William spent quite a bit of time with his uncle, who cared for him when his mother's work schedule kept her away long hours. His uncle, he felt, could be awfully bossy, and William took no small delight in stories of the teasing uncle who, in the end, was always put in his place:

My Uncle and the Cussing Bird

OK this how it started. My uncle wanted a bird so bad, he tried to get one out of the sky. Now that's dumb. So one day he was hoping that he can get a bird free. And I said to my Uncle Glen, "How are you going to do that?" And he said, "I don't know." So two months later a box came, and it said bird. And my uncle started screaming and teasing me. He was saying, "Oh yes. I have a bird. Ha, ha, ha ha, ha. I have a bird. Ha, ha, ha ha, ha. And he opened it, and the bird was dead. And he started to cry. The whole couch was wet with tears. I tried onions but he started to cry more. Then, he started to cry more. The next week, more and more boxes, and he kept saying, "Ha, ha, ha ha, ha." And one day a box came—Yes yes yes! The bird said "I'm polly-want-a cracker." [And] he said, "F___ you big mouth." And my uncle never wanted a bird again. Do you

know what he wanted? A fish. [piece given conventional spelling and punctuation for ease of reading]

Although story writing has been stressed in this article, across the curriculum, the foundation for reading and writing is built through talk-filled activities in which children have access to many symbolic tools. Those tools may allow children to give form to their understandings and more easily share those understandings with others. There is a need, in other words, for putting child literacy in its place.

PUTTING CHILD LITERACY IN ITS (SYMBOLIC) PLACE: IMPLICATIONS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In many publications for early childhood teachers, readers are told of "developmental stages of writing," progressing from child scribbles to invented spelling (a more accurate statement might be the stages of "spelling"). In this chapter, I have hoped to make clear that such statements are based on attention to the surface manifestations of writing (the marks on the page) and not to the complex underlying reality. *There is no linear progression in written language development.* Rather its development is linked in complex ways to the whole of children's symbolic repertoires; its evolution involves shifts of function and symbolic form, social give-and-take, as children explore and gradually control new ways to organize and represent their world and to interact with other people about that world.

Figuring out how to make word pictures and visible rhythms and sounds, how to make a string of black and white squiggles an enacted and dialogic world is a basic developmental challenge. Thus, the roots of William's story—and the ones Lamar has yet to write—are not in squiggles but in drawn pictures, told stories, dramatic play, and in much talk with people interested in what the children have to "say" in many media.

Putting writing in its symbolic place—seeing its emergence within the child's total symbolic repertoire—suggests, first, that *children in the early childhood years need many opportunities to use the arts—to draw, play, dance and sing.* For young children, the most accessible media are those that most directly capture the movements of their own bodies, the sounds of their own voices, and the images made by their own hands, as lines, curves and colors take form on paper.

First grade teacher Karen Gallas (1991) describes a unit on insects and their life cycles and, in the process, beautifully details how drawing, painting, music, movement, drama, poetry, and storytelling, "each domain separately and together, became part of [the children's] total repertoire as learners." In a classroom in which cultural, social, and language barriers might have kept children apart, use of the arts allowed individuals many avenues for learning, expression, and communication. Some children sketched insects, focusing on visual details, while others dramatized the cycle of an insect,

their bodies capturing the changing shapes of life, and still others drew grass as seen from the perspective of an insect. New intelligences, in Gardner's (1985) sense, were visible as children forged new understandings through colorful images and felt movements, understandings that will surely inform their writing and reading of static, black and white squiggles on a page.

The curious world and the children themselves should be the center of the curriculum, not writing or reading. Indeed the point of this article has been that making literacy the center of the curriculum in early childhood may keep those black and white squiggles from becoming dynamic, colorful intellectual and social tools. This point leads to a second recommendation—that *teachers help connect print with the liveliness of children's use of other symbolic forms*. Paley and Soderbergh provide child-rich examples of how this can be done.

In a series of books on her own classroom life with children, Paley (e.g., 1981, 1986) has illustrated how three-, four-, and five-year-olds can collaboratively transform themes of their dramatic play into dictated texts and back again to play. For many children, dictated words "did not sufficiently represent the action, which needed to be shared" through the media of their own voices and actions (1981, p. 12). Transforming their own texts into dramas allows children and teachers opportunities to find words for unarticulated ideas.

Soderbergh (1990) studied a five-and-one-half-year-old's spontaneous illustrations of stories she had read. She suggests how drawing may help some children reveal the "inner pictures" that underlay their efforts to make sense of text (p. 189). In one especially vivid example, the child illustrated a Bible story about the Israelites' trip to Canaan "'with their children, cows and sheep and all the precious things they had received (i.e., from the Egyptians)'" ; she drew a procession of people, all carrying parcels wrapped up in paper and bound with ribbons.

Third, *children should be allowed the artistic and social space they need to infuse meaning into their own writing through drawing, social talk, and dramatic play*. Children's first explorations of writing's forms and functions may give rise to more focused attempts to match precisely meanings and forms inside familiar activities, such as composing letters, making names, or, as Lamar illustrated, drawing and telling stories.

Lamar made good progress in literacy learning during his kindergarten year, but he did not make progress in his first grade year. One difficulty was that his teacher viewed talk during writing as useful *only* for getting or giving "help"—all other talk was just "playing around." Drawing was also discouraged during daily "journal" time. But it was playful and social talk during drawing that, in fact, helped Lamar shape his ideas and that provided the social energy for his writing. Without such support, he maintained only minimal involvement in writing.

Children's interweaving of media does pose developmental challenges as, eventually, children must differentiate and gain control over the unique powers of each medium. So a fourth implication is to *talk to children about*

their efforts and, in that way, to help them reflect upon their processes. Indeed, many early childhood educators consider reflecting with young children about their ways of drawing (Schirrmacher, 1988; Thompson, 1990), playing (Christie, 1991), and writing to be major ways of supporting young children's development. What aspects of their imagined world are in the pictures? the print? in dramatized action? or still unarticulated, waiting for an interested other to help give them shape. At the same time, children must be allowed to stay in charge of their own intentions (Genishi & Dyson, 1984). Young children feel no compulsion to put into written words the meanings they express through drawing and talk. The differentiation and control of these varied media is a gradual developmental process, one we nurture but cannot force.

All of the preceding implications lead to a fifth: *as early childhood educators we should be cautious about uncritically applying "writing process" curricula developed for older children.* Many educators, elementary through college level, make use of writing process pedagogy (e.g., Graves, 1983). This pedagogy has made critical contributions to language arts curricula, as it has very sensibly called attention to the process, rather than the product, of writing—the brainstorming of ideas, the drafting of first efforts for feedback during "conferences," revising and finally publishing. But some applications of these pedagogical ideas may be too structured and too focused on writing *per se* for very young children.

Process pedagogy emphasizes individual children's production of "meaningful" text, but young children sometimes freely explore writing's forms in ways that may be, for an adult, very "meaningless." In addition, early attempts to write may happen in socially playful ways, as in Lamar's case; serious talk during a writing "conference" with their teacher may be less important than playful and reflective talk during an activity involving writing. Most importantly, young children do not seem to "revise" in the same ways older children do. As discussed, children often freely reinterpret their products when their initial goals do not work out. For example, if their drawings do not match their intentions, they do not necessarily revise their drawings—they revise their intentions. In their *next* efforts, they may try a new approach.

In similar ways, children persist in exploring a theme in composition after composition, in playful drama after drama, much as Lamar did with his ocean scenes. Unfulfilled intentions spur next efforts. This is quite different than "revising," in which children redo the same product. Such revisions might happen first in joint efforts between teachers and children, such as in class dictated texts.

Finally, the complexity of written language development and its complex links to the **whole of children's symbolic repertoire**, suggest a need for *caution in applying simple functional models of oral language in research on written language growth.* In early childhood, a number of researchers have studied children's dramatic play for evidence of oral language functions as applied to writing, assuming that written language is an extension only of oral language.

The observation of children's awareness of literacy functions is a helpful tool for teachers, allowing them insight into children's awareness of literacy's uses. But functional awareness does not ensure development (Vygotsky, 1987), the complex social and cognitive processes that underlie change.

Unlike oral language, written language involves the use of a deliberately controlled symbolic system to mediate activity. A child, for example, who says she is pretending to write a letter may not be using written language to mediate her activity. To use Halliday's (1973) terms, the child is showing an awareness of the interactional function of literacy, perhaps, but the letter is fulfilling an imaginary as much as an interactional function. It is more prop than mediator. To understand how development occurs, it would be necessary to study how the child attempts to write a letter, the role of that letter writing in the child's social activity (including inside dramatic social play), the role of other media (e.g., drawing, talking, and dramatic gestures) in the accomplishment of the letter-writing, and how the child's interaction with other people and with other media changes over time, as writing is transformed from primarily a prop to a mediator.

In closing, to understand and foster written language development, we must view that development within the particularities of children's social and artistic lives. Indeed, we as adult writers may turn to media that seem to fit most comfortably the initial contours of our ideas before struggling to craft those ideas within the linear confines of print: we may draw, map, make gestures in the air, or even sprawl conversational language across a page. It was in the midst of dramatic happenings at sea that Lamar's writing took hold in the kindergarten—and, without such support, seemed adrift in the first grade. In brief, written language emerges most strongly when firmly embedded within the supportive symbolic sea of playful gestures, pictures, and talk.

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